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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 001459

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF ORTHODOXY

REF: A. ISTANBUL 381

[B](#). ISTANBUL 843

[C](#). ISTANBUL 1279

[D](#). ISTANBUL 5141

[E](#). VATICAN 2671

[F](#). ISTANBUL 1183

[G](#). HAVANA 1227

[H](#). ISTANBUL 71

[I](#). 03 ISTANBUL 760

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for Reasons 1.4 (b&d)

[1](#). (sbu) Summary: In addition to the struggle to maintain Istanbul as a viable seat for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Bartholomew faces a rising challenge for moral and ecclesiastical authority within the Orthodox world from Moscow-based Russian Patriarch Alexy II. End Summary.

[2](#). (sbu) Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the first among equals among Orthodox leaders worldwide, faces two challenges that, left unresolved, threaten the very future of this venerable, 1500-year old institution. The first is the viability of Istanbul as a patriarchal seat. The Patriarch traces his religious authority back to when Istanbul (then Constantinople) was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire and Christianity was adopted as the state religion. Today, however, the Patriarch's once-vibrant flock of millions of Greek Orthodox has fled (less than 3,000 remain) the trappings of its historical legacy, including the Hagia Sophia (the physical seat of the Patriarchate for almost a millennium but now a museum), and the Halki Seminary (where several generations of Orthodox priests were trained), and countless other properties have been expropriated or shut down. Patriarchate officials tell us that unless they reopen the seminary, regain properties, and break free from the burden of Turkish regulations (particularly the requirement that the Patriarch be a Turkish citizen), the institution will die along with the last dozen or so of its surviving septuagenarian Metropolitans (see refs a-d and previous cables for reporting on these issues).

[3](#). (sbu) Even assuming that the Patriarch can secure the viability of its Istanbul seat, however, Bartholomew faces another major challenge from Moscow-based Russian Patriarch Alexy II for ecclesiastical authority in the wider Orthodox world. Styling itself as the "Third Rome," Moscow claims that it assumed authority within the Orthodox community beginning in the 15th century with the fall of Constantinople, the Byzantine Empire, and much of the Orthodox Balkans to the Ottoman Muslims and the subsequent elevation of Metropolitan Job of Moscow to the rank of Patriarch. Although temporarily suspended by the Soviet regime's oppression of the Russian Orthodox Church for much of the 20th century, the Moscow church's efforts to extend its influence beyond its geographic jurisdiction have continued unabated. With abundant sources of income among its vibrant community of over 100 million faithful, three seminaries in which to train new generations of clergy, and open political support from the Russian government, Alexy is well-placed to challenge Bartholomew on a number of fronts.

Shot Across the Bow: Estonia

[4](#). (sbu) The first open dispute between Moscow and Istanbul in recent years was over Estonia, where 50,000 Orthodox Christians, mostly Russians, make their home. Although the Estonian Church had placed itself under the jurisdiction of the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarch during its brief independence from Russia between 1923 and 1944, Moscow had since reasserted its control. After regaining independence in 1991, at the request of Estonian Orthodox activists, and with the approval of the Estonian government, Bartholomew reasserted his jurisdiction over the Orthodox community and installed an Archbishop in 1996. Alexy, who had previously served himself as the Metropolitan for Estonia during the later Soviet period, responded by temporarily severing formal ties, or in Church parlance, "breaking communion" with Bartholomew. After months of negotiation, both sides agreed to allow the Estonians to choose for themselves (most parishes chose Bartholomew, but most of the Russian Orthodox population remains loyal to Moscow).

Struggle for the Heartland: Ukraine

[5](#). (sbu) Looming large in comparison to the skirmish for influence over Estonia is the impending struggle for the

loyalty of 40 million Ukrainian Orthodox faithful in Ukraine, the original heartland of Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy. Ukrainian Orthodox Christians are currently divided. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) has the most parishes, followed by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC-KP), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). Poll suggest, however, that most of the population is loyal to the smaller UOC-KP. (Note: In addition some 5 million Ukrainians identify themselves as members of the Ukrainian Eastern-Rite Catholic church, a church that is loyal to Pope John Paul II in Rome, but continues to maintain Orthodox traditions (the existence of these churches remains a major source of friction between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, see refs e-f)).

16. (sbu) The UOC-KP and the UAOC have appealed to Bartholomew to help unite the fragmented Ukrainian Church and help it obtain independence from Moscow. Motivated by a combination of altruism and a desire to regain authority assumed by Moscow in the 17th century (but never recognized by Istanbul), Bartholomew has dispatched envoys to mediate between the various Churches. Moscow, meanwhile, is reluctant to surrender its authority over a jurisdiction which includes as many as a quarter of its total parishes and has provided up to two-thirds of its clergy. Bartholomew's point-man on this issue, Metropolitan Meliton of Philadelphia, the Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, told Poloff that the negotiation process will likely take years, but that he hopes some formula can be found whereby a unified Ukrainian Church is granted autocephalous status under Istanbul, perhaps with an understanding that Moscow will select or vet the appointments of the senior-most clergy.

Orthodox in Havana?

17. (sbu) The most recent chapter in this ongoing rivalry took place far from Moscow and Istanbul earlier this year in Havana, Cuba. In a deliberate snub to his former superpower patron, Fidel Castro offered to donate a church to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and invited Bartholomew to visit to celebrate the occasion. Despite considerable pressure from the U.S. government (and this Consulate) to refuse the invitation, Bartholomew told us that his ongoing struggle with Alexy for influence in the Orthodox world compelled him to accept; if he refused, Castro would simply offer the Church to Alexy instead. Despite the small size of the Orthodox community and the likely prospect that Castro would seek to manipulate the visit to his own advantage, Bartholomew visited in January, spent four days with Castro, and gladly accepted the new church (see ref g-h).

Worldwide Battle for Hearts and Souls

18. (c) The Russian Patriarchate has not confined its ambitions to its immediate neighbors and one-time client states. In a much more conciliatory fashion, Moscow has reached out to Orthodox communities in Western Europe, the United States, and, most recently, in Asia. The Russian Orthodox Church has long had a presence in Western Europe, but has moved to open new churches and parishes throughout the region. Last year, Alexy wrote to several Orthodox Bishops in Europe offering them more autonomy if they were to forsake Constantinople's authority for his own (ref i) and has opened new churches throughout Europe. According to Metropolitan Meliton, Moscow's established dioceses in Austria, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, and the Netherlands are in direct violation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's authority. Metropolitan Meliton told Poloff that he is also increasingly alarmed by similar moves into India, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Australia, and even the Seychelles. The Patriarchate believes that these expansionary efforts have the full support of the Russian government. As Bartholomew himself told the CG earlier this year, "the Russians constantly pursue political ends through religion." Meliton told Poloff that he has heard reports that the Russian Foreign Ministry had concluded an agreement with Alexy to allow the Russian Orthodox Church to open chapels in its Embassies and Consulates around the world. Meliton even expects Russian President Putin, who postponed an official trip to Turkey earlier this month, to petition the Turkish government for permission to open one or more of their own churches under the very nose of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Note: Currently, Bartholomew permits Russian priests to perform services in churches under his control, but the Russians have long sought their own churches).

Comment

19. (sbu) Although these venerable religious institutions are primarily engaged in providing spiritual services and guidance to millions of devoted followers, much of their institutional tension and international rivalries center on more mundane issues, such as possession of churches and control of territory. As recently as mid-August,

Metropolitan Meliton and Metropolitan Demetrios of America traveled to Jerusalem in an effort to resolve a dispute over control of the site in Jerusalem. The fact that the Patriarchate spends considerable time on such issues is an indication that it clearly sees its very survival as depending on a successful defense of its canonical privileges and moral authority in the Orthodox world.

10 (c) This rivalry may also have unfortunate implications for the Patriarchate's continuing efforts to secure its status here in Istanbul. Erol Muterimler, an influential academic, suggested to us recently that resistance among the Turkish military and bureaucracy to acknowledging the Patriarch's ecumenical status and reopening the Halki seminary may stem from a desire to move closer to Russia and avoid an involvement in what they see as a risky rivalry between Washington and Moscow. A positive Turkish response to a Putin request for Russian churches to be opened in Turkey (see para 7) might be an indication that such thinking has some currency in Ankara.

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